

Monday, April 10, 2017  
Chrism Mass

A man's daughter had asked her pastor to come and pray with her father. When the priest arrived, he found Henry lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows. An empty chair sat beside his bed.

The priest assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit, so he said: "I guess you were expecting me"

The sick man said, "No, who are you?" The priest told him his name and then remarked, "I saw the empty chair and I figured you knew I was going to show up."

"Oh yeah, the chair. Would you mind closing the door?"

The priest nodded his head and closed the door so that they were alone.

The first thing he thought was he wanted to go to confession.

Then the old man said, "I have never told anyone this, especially not my daughter, but all of my life I never knew how to pray. We only went to church when I was very young. I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it went right over my head."

"My family wasn't too religious and to be honest I abandoned any attempt at prayer when I became an adult, until a few months ago when an old friend came to see me after he heard I was sick."

He said he was praying for me. I thanked him and then I asked him if he could teach me to pray because I didn't know anything about it."

“Do you know what he said? He said: Henry, prayer is just as simple as having a conversation with Jesus. Here is what I suggest to make it feel right for you. Sit down with an empty chair in front of you and with faith you can just speak to Jesus like he’s sitting right there on the chair.”

The old man looked at the priest and said, “So, I tried it and I’ve been doing it every day. I must say that I can feel the Lord’s presence when I do it.”

My daughter brought me to live with her when she found out I was so sick, so I have to be careful. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she’d either have a nervous break down or send me off to a place for old crazy people.

It turns out the old man was baptized Catholic and so the priest helped him make a general confession. He then anointed Henry as he celebrated the sacrament of the sick.

About two weeks later the daughter called the priest to tell him that her father had died. When she found him he was kind of stretched over to that empty chair beside his bed.

There are different versions of that story, and I know it is kind of trite. But it made me think of a question.

The question is this: Who was anointed in that story?

The obvious answer is the old man with cancer was anointed by the priest. But who was anointed in that story?

The word “anointing” literally means the pouring of oil on someone or something in a religious ceremony. It’s biblical purpose was to make something or someone sacred.

And, the word “sacred” applies to whatever pertains to God as distinguished from what pertains to God’s creatures.

In our Catholic faith, the sacraments are sensible signs or symbols, instituted by Christ, which we receive grace and sanctification. These sensible signs or symbols include:

- Words; prayers of blessing and consecration
- Actions; such as pouring on water at baptism as a sign of cleansing
- Some physical matter such as the water used in baptism.

The brief story I shared says that Henry, who was very ill, was anointed by the priest. That certainly suggests the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.

So you may be thinking that the question, “Who was anointed in that story?” is as trivial as the story itself. The answer is obvious.

But this question, who was anointed in that story, can help us to enter more deeply into the celebration of this Chrism Mass in which oils are blessed or consecrated for use in the sacraments of the Church, including Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, and Anointing of the Sick.

In his book, *A Life of Daring Simplicity*, our own brother priest, Msgr. Michael Becker, offers daily meditations on the priesthood.

His meditations are from the writings and sayings of saints and perhaps future saints of our modern time. These include Popes and priests and theologians and laypersons who have some remarkable thoughts about the priesthood.

Msgr. Becker reminds us that if priests want the people entrusted to their care to develop a meaningful spiritual life, they must provide a living example of what that is.

Each page of his book begins with a verse from Sacred Scripture, followed by a few paragraphs from the writer of the day. At the end of each page he offers a brief prayer or question to encourage further reflection on the text.

At the end of a reflection given by Pope Francis during the Chrism Mass in 2014, Msgr. Becker offers this question: "In what ways is my priestly ministry a fragrant anointing of the people I serve? Let me repeat that...

It's an awesome question for all of us who are ordained priests or our seminarians who are in formation to become priests.

But I want everyone here to pay attention to this question and a few thoughts of Pope Francis from that Chrism Mass three years ago because he is very clear that this question has implications for everyone and not just the priests.

Pope Francis observes that there are three significant features of our priestly joy.

First, it is a joy which anoints us. He reminds us that this joy penetrated deep within our hearts when we were anointed down to our very bones at the time of ordination. This joy, our joy of the priesthood is the echo of this anointing which is like a wellspring that never runs dry.

Second, it is an imperishable joy. Pope Francis reminds us that no one can take away or increase this unfailing joy that is a gift from God at ordination. Not even sin or life's troubles can remove it, and even if it

feels like it has been diminished, it always remains intact and it can be renewed, just as we are doing today in this Chrism Mass.

Third, it is a missionary joy, which spreads and attracts others. Most especially, Pope Francis says that this missionary joy of the priesthood starts backwards. It starts with those who are the farthest from us and from the Church, perhaps people like Henry who wasn't on the pastor's regular list for home visits.

Pope Francis observes that the anointing we received at ordination is meant for anointing God's holy and faithful people: for baptizing and confirming them, healing and sanctifying them, blessing, comforting and evangelizing them.

The joy of being anointed with the oil of gladness of the Lord Jesus Christ is a gift for each one of us who have been called to share in his holy priesthood. It is a gift that is supposed to be re-gifted.

It is a gift that should remind us to ask during our daily examination of conscience: "In what ways is my priestly ministry a fragrant anointing of the people I serve?"

It is the gift announced by the Lord Jesus as he read from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah in the synagogue:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives,  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

St. Luke tells us that Jesus announced this gift of anointing at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth.

He said it to the people who knew him since he was a child; who saw him being trained to be a carpenter; and were more than mildly surprised when he started to speak like a Rabbi.

They were not always receptive to his words. Yet Jesus never lost sight of the joy that he received when he was anointed. Jesus never forgot that the anointing he received, and the joy that comes from it, is a gift that it is to be shared.

So brother priests, in preparation for the renewal of commitment to priestly service, I ask you to consider once more the question posed by one of our own brothers: “In what ways is my priestly ministry a fragrant anointing of the people I serve?”

As you think about your response to that question, I want to remind you that your people, our people, that we are to serve, know that we are imperfect.

They know that all of us are sinners who are in need of God’s mercy and in need of support and guidance from one another.

They know that we are human, but they also know that we have been anointed, that we have received a great gift from the High Priest, Jesus Christ. So they ask us to serve them; to anoint them.

They ask us to bring them glad tidings, which is nothing more and nothing less than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They ask us, as Pope Francis urges, to become the anointing that we bring.

And in return they anoint us. Even if there is no thank you, they anoint us because they have allowed us to minister to Christ, to honor and love him in our anointed ministry which is his gift.

Which brings me back to my question at the end of Henry's story. It's a story about an old man who had not been in church since he was a young boy. His daughter who somehow found the faith, called for the priest.

Then the priest heard about an empty chair as he encountered and a person who wanted to know how to pray. The story says that the priest anointed Henry before he died.

But the question still remains for our reflection today, and our action tomorrow and the next day, who was anointed in that story?